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PCB spill shuts 1407 Chevron high-rise on Market Street

By Bruce Adams
Examiner staff writer

More than 100 workers were evacuated and hundreds more kept from the 20-story Standard Oil Building at 555 Market St. early today when an underground PG&E transformer ruptured and sent clouds of toxic, PCB-laced smoke into the air.

Police and firemen blocked off the area shortly after the transformer broke at 6:30 a.m. The normally heavy automobile and Muni surface traffic in the Market-Sutter-Bush streets area was re-routed until after 9 a.m. BART and Muni Metro trains were not affected.

Health Department officials ordered the building, one of two housing Standard Oil's Chevron division offices, closed for the rest of the day and said it was possible the lobby of 555 Market St. "has been contaminated" by PCB.

It was not believed that the fumes reached the upper, however; the air intake system is at the rear and the transformer break occurred beneath the front sidewalk.

People in the building at the time of the break left by 7:30 a.m. and hundreds more were stopped as they tried to report for work. The head of one department said he sent his 500 employees home.

Ramon Brion, who works on the fifth floor, went out to move his car about 6:30 a.m. and when he walked back he noticed what appeared to be smoke coming from a manhole in the street. He also discovered the elevators had stopped.

Brion said he talked to the building security guard, who called PG&E. The guard said he noticed a "chemical odor."

Mike Higgins, who works in a large computer center, said fellow workers told him the computers shut down because of the transformer breakdown.

"This is tremendously expensive," he said, "I understand it costs about $100,000 for each hour those computers are down."

As employees came to work, they gathered outside waiting for a report from the health department. At 8:20 a.m., Dr. Richard Wade, hazardous materials troubleshooter for the department, said a preliminary investigation had determined the transformer had contained PCB.

"We do have a PCBs incident," Wade said. "A lot of PCBs leaked out of that transformer into the underground vault. The oil is about a foot deep in the vault."

While Wade said a positive identification would take longer, he pointed out that a sign on the broken transformer said it contained PCB and a computer printout obtained by the Fire Department listed that transformer as containing the substance.

After his initial inspection, Wade and other health officials donned bright yellow "moon suits" as protection against the fumes, and inspected the building. He reported that the lobby might be contaminated but he did not believe the PCB had spread to upper floors.

Gregg Pruett, a PG&E spokesman, said the transformer rupture was "preceded by a power surge, which might have caused the rupture. The oil is a foot deep in the underground vault. A transformer contains about 500 gallons of PCB-laced oil, but we don't know how much has spilled in the vault, which is 12 feet deep and 16 by 20 feet in size."

After the Fire Department cordoned off the area, some early morning passers-by expressed fear that "this might be another 1 Market Plaza thing."

They were referring to a major PCB contamination which occurred May 11 and sent deadly fumes through part of the big One Market Plaza complex. There was an explosion and fire in that accident.

The fumes today apparently came from oil spilling on cold metal and cement.

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PCB explosion closes Standard Oil building

1407

SAN FRANCISCO — The explosion of an electric power transformer contaminated the main lobby and the plaza and sidewalk of the Standard Oil building with Plychlorinated Biphenyls at 6:30 a.m. Friday.

The 22-story building at 555 Market St. had to be closed, and some 200 people were sent home.

The Pacific Gas and Electric Company's Gregg Pruett said there was no fire, but hot mineral oil containing PCBs vaporized when it spilled on the floor of the transformer vault in the the basement. It released the steam through a manhole at the base of the building. PCBs are a suspected carcinogen.

Dr. Richard Wade, the city's hazardous materials expert, said late Friday afternoon that sample showed a contamination of about 1,250 micrograms of PCBs on the manhole.

"It's not a significant health problem at that level," Wade said. "When you get up around 3,000 it is."

He said a low level of contamination was found inside the lobby doors, apparently tracked in by cleanup crews where the level was one to 10 micrograms of PCBs per 100 square centimeters.